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Role of the United Nations system in supporting the efforts of African countries to achieve sustainable development

Statement submitted by the African Services Committee, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 30 and 31 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 26 July 1996.

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Statement submitted by the African Services Committee

The global crisis known as HIV/AIDS is, in the United Nations Secretary-General's words, Africa's biggest development challenge. In addressing African heads of State and other ministers at the recent summit in Abuja, the Secretary-General proclaimed, "We cannot afford to treat [HIV/AIDS] as one aspect of the battle for development, because it will not wait for us to win that battle. The cost — whether measured in human misery today, or in loss of hope for tomorrow — is simply too high. We have to turn and face it head on."[1]

In light of the continent-wide emergency, the Economic and Social Council cannot even begin its discussions without framing development in the context of HIV/AIDS. The World Bank has clearly stated that HIV/AIDS is swiftly dismantling the development achievements of the past 50 years. Mark Malloch Brown, UNDP Administrator, states that AIDS is devastating in terms of creating and deepening poverty, reversing achievements in education, and diverting meagre health budgets away from other priorities. And by cutting deep into all sectors of society, HIV/AIDS undermines vital economic growth — perhaps reducing future GDP in Africa by a third over the next 20 years.

If the world is going to confront the AIDS crisis head on, substantial financial resources must be identified and released. The Secretary-General and other world leaders have recently heeded this call by endorsing the need for a multi-billion-dollar global health fund. But if the United Nations system is committed to mobilizing significant resources to fight AIDS, it cannot do so without promoting large-scale multilateral and bilateral debt cancellation and insisting that OECD countries achieve agreed-upon targets for official development assistance (ODA).

The link between debt and AIDS is clear and convincing. African nations struggle with annual debt service payments of $14.5 billion; in some countries debt service constitutes an amount five times as large as national budget allocations for health care. Key UNAIDS co-sponsors, including the World Bank, recognize that debt servicing displaces essential spending on poverty reduction, including HIV/AIDS. The Highly Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative is insufficient and must be deepened and broadened to reach its goals. Of 46 eligible countries, only 22 are receiving debt relief and, as such, are still spending more on debt than health care. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which together are owed as much as the next 17 largest creditors combined, can afford to alleviate Africa's enormous debt burden.

This high-level segment has been convened in order to highlight the role of the United Nations system in supporting African countries to achieve sustainable development. It is worth noting therefore that the United Nations system has consistently and coherently declared the significance of fighting AIDS as it relates to international peace and security;[2] children's survival and development; worldwide social development; and the promotion of universally recognized human rights including the right to the highest attainable standard of health. At the same time, the United Nations has unconditionally announced that debt relief is linked to AIDS and therefore essential for Africa if it is to achieve any measure of sustainable

[1] United Nations Secretary-General's address to the African Summit on HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Other Related Infectious Diseases, Abuja, 26 April 2001.

[2] Security Council resolution 1308 (2000).

development. An emphasis on the link between debt and AIDS will be particularly important during the high-level policy dialogue between Council members and the heads of international financial and trade institutions, now scheduled for 16 July 2001, the first day of the high-level segment.

Specifically, we urge the Council to consider making the following recommendations:

(a) In return for demonstrable commitments to fighting poverty and AIDS, the multilateral institutions should cancel 100 per cent of the debts they are owed by qualifying indebted and poor countries, expanding resources available for a global HIV/AIDS response;

(b) The G-8, IMF and the World Bank should target 100 per cent cancellation of bilateral debt, through both HIPC and non-HIPC mechanisms;

(c) Official development assistance towards the target of 0.7 per cent of GNP of donor countries should be restored, with special emphasis on HIV/AIDS control, and the attainment of a global level of ODA disbursements towards that purpose of at least $10 billion within three years;

(d) African countries should be applauded for the recent commitment at Abuja to commit 15 per cent of their annual budgets to the health sector.[3] African leaders should be supported in efforts effectively to design and implement national AIDS strategic plans, using savings from debt relief to fund such initiatives;

(e) Debtor nations should invest in the development of government and civil society accountability mechanisms, including regular auditing, conducted to international standards and generally accepted accounting principles, in concert with the negotiation of debt cancellation for HIV/AIDS programmes at the country level. Anti-corruption mechanisms must be incorporated into all debt-for-AIDS programmes.

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[3] Abuja Declaration on HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and Other Related Infectious Diseases (27 April 2001).